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CONCLUSION

Social work: a unique profession in a diverse context

Dina Sidhva, George Palattiyil and Mono Chakrabarti

An important issue that emerges from the various chapters in this edited volume is that social work has become a global profession; one that is underpinned by a commitment to promote social justice, human rights and equality (IFSW, 2001; Hare, 2004; Sewpaul and Jones, 2014). Over the last couple of centuries, social work has evolved into a unique profession, practised in diverse contexts through a multitude of approaches (Dominelli, 2010). The Directory of Schools of Social Work compiled by the International Association of Schools of Social Work suggests that there are around 3,000 schools of social work and IFSW's website indicates that there are 1.5 million professional social workers practising in at least eighty four countries (ibid). One thing that clearly emerges from this data is the sheer diversity that social work encompasses, making it a profession that is global in nature, yet responding to local needs. However, no matter how diverse social work is, the core of the social work profession is embedded in the universal values of equality, worth, and dignity of all people; is motivated by the aspirations for human rights and social justice; and strives to alleviate poverty and empower marginalised and oppressed people in order to realise their true potential (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012). In that sense, social work can be described as an empowering and emancipatory practice.

We live in a globalised world – a global village, where geographical distance has been narrowed by the technological developments which have advanced the condition of many of us. Yet, the world is also witnessing heightened inequality (Jones and Truell, 2012), poverty, human rights violations, forced migration and such like. With access to internet and social media and ever increasing rich-poor divide, the world is becoming increasingly complex (Dominelli, 2010). The net impact of all these is increasingly continuing to exacerbate the inequality and further marginalise sections of populations and deny them the ability to achieve their full potential. Terrorism, natural disasters, new pandemics and new forms of conflict and their catastrophic impact on people (Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Darfur to name a few) place tremendous responsibility on social work and social development practitioners across the world to respond to these challenges.

Social work needs to reflect on these global challenges and find newer ways of addressing these issues, which means perhaps more of the same may not be appropriate or even desirable. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development agreed by IASSW, IFSW and ICSW (2014) endorsed four priority themes to promote 1) social and economic equalities; 2) dignity and worth of people, 3) environmental and community sustainability; and 4) the importance of human relationships; thus identifying a shared commitment and a renewed determination to promote social work and social justice globally (Jones and Truell, 2012).

Social Work – A profession in myriad shades

Social workers operate at the point where social forces and individual behaviour meet (IFSW/IASSW, 2000). Nonetheless, the contexts in which contemporary social work operates are multi-faceted and cover the global, the regional, the national and the local (Dominelli, 2010, p.26). In most of the Western nation states, social work assumes a statutory welfare role with legal powers for assessment and intervention in situations of need, while in developing countries social work is concerned more with issues of poverty, education and development and is linked to humanitarianism, activism and empowerment. For example, social work in the UK is more formalised and has a statutory status with the title of social work given protection in the law. Social work education is underpinned by standards laid down by the regulatory bodies and social workers have the powers to intervene in times of crisis where the welfare of a service user (child neglect or abuse of older people, for example) is at risk. Social work's primary role is to intervene early, minimise risks and promote welfare; in most of the European countries, thus social work has come to be recognised as an important public service and can be said to be an element within the European social model (Jones, 2013, Lorenz, 1994).

On the other hand, social work operates to effect structural changes through social and political action in some of the developing countries of the Global South. Social workers in such contexts have been working to eradicate poverty and promote health and education; which gained further impetus with the launch of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations (2000). The formal training and practice of social workers is also less regulated in these contexts. For example, the First Report of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2014)

indicates that social work is an established, but mostly unregulated profession across the African continent, although some national governments are discussing formal regulations of qualifications and title, as has been implemented in South Africa (Osei-Hwedie, 2013). In the Asian region, especially in China and India, there has been a rapid growth in the number of schools of social work, and India continues to produce a large number of social workers (Tan, 2013) who operate at the grassroots level. For example in India, globalisation and its overwhelming impact on India's masses have led to a more radical and activist type of intervention with mass movements, such as mass agitation in support of the poor displaced by multi-national hydro-electric projects, or supporting the victims of industrial accidents (the Bhopal Gas tragedy) or advocacy movements promoting the equality of Dalits (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012). In these situations, it is fair to say that social work is no longer seen as being confined to the narrow realms of statutory interventions mandated by the State; rather it strives to effect social and economic changes by radical actions aimed at social and community development. For example, some schools of social work in India have social action projects that advocate for and improve the conditions of unorganised construction workers; marginalised fishing communities; trafficked women and children, informal education for street children; and people living with HIV (Alphonse, George and Moffat, 2008; Kuruvilla, 2004). What is noteworthy is the fact that while risk and vulnerability of marginalised people are the driving force behind social work interventions, many of the interventions take place without the statutory powers as understood in the Western social work context (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012).

An emerging field of operation for social workers in some of the developing countries of the world is organising poverty alleviation programmes through micro-finance (Ali and Hatta, 2010; Hulme and Moore, 2006). Participation, self-reliance, sustainability, and empowerment are the key principles often applied by social workers in the design for poverty reduction strategies (IFSW, 2012a), which seeks to involve other stakeholders including civil society and community organizations. Moreover, industrial corporations are a key destination for qualified social workers, who are tasked with promoting the virtues of large business corporations in the name of 'corporate social responsibility'. Interestingly, one of the most life-changing spheres that social workers operate is in managing the after-effects of natural disasters (for example, tsunami or earthquake) and supporting efforts at rehabilitation (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012).

The growing impact of globalisation, cross border human mobility and natural disasters poses new challenges for social workers (Dominelli, 2010). With climate change, emergence of new pandemics and increasing threat of terrorism, there is an ever greater need for social work to champion and uphold our basic human rights; these global issues hamper social and economic development, which are central to social work involvement at the global level.

Social work – A global profession

We are living in a period of globalisation (Alphonse, George and Moffat, 2008; Kuruvilla, 2004) that is impacting almost every country in the world. The social work profession worldwide has been increasingly influenced by globalisation (Midgley, 2001; Lalayants, Doel and Kachkachishvili, 2014) and it has begun to recognise the impact of globalisation on almost every problem that social work practitioners deal with (Kendal, 2008). Social workers are frequently called upon to deal with global social problems such as asylum seekers and refugees, (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2011), street children, alcohol and substance abuse, HIV and AIDS, human trafficking, cross-border adoption and so on. The field of international social work holds significant potential in this context as a response to globalisation (Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Cox, 2000). Social workers use diverse approaches, ranging from culturally sensitive and cross-cultural practices to advocacy and campaigns to work with asylum seekers and refugees and in diverse contexts such as aid/humanitarian settings, social development and human rights organisations; these diverse approaches across different cultural settings have now been broadly labelled as international social work (Dominelli, 2005; Midgley, 2001; Healy, 2008; Cox and Pawar, 2013)

The recent past has seen a considerable increase in the coverage of international social work in the wider literature (Midgley, 2001; Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Healy, 2008; Mohan, 2008; Razack, 2009; Cox and Pawar, 2013). The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, (IFSW, 2012b), along with the global demand for social workers, international placements for qualifying social work students, social workers without borders, role of social workers in humanitarian and aid agencies and so on have further contributed to this debate.

While globalisation has led to increased economic independence for many, it has also exacerbated the rich-poor divide and inequalities and other social problems experienced by large sections of the population. The world is witnessing complex emergencies, creating major global challenges. The question is whether social work practitioners are adequately trained to understand the global forces driving these problems or are in a position to respond to them effectively (Lalayants, Doel and Kachkachishvili, 2014). More precisely, how can contemporary social work respond to these complex and emerging needs; how can social work educators prepare a workforce fit to respond to the Global Agenda (IFSW, 2012b), how can we find commonalities and shared commitments from across the more established Western models of social work and more humanitarian/development oriented social work as practiced in much of the developing countries of the world?

As social work globally moves towards realising the Global Agenda, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed in ensuring a shared commitment and common platform for promoting social justice, equality and human rights. See Cox and Pawar (2013), who examine these challenges in their latest book 'International Social Work: Issues, Strategies and Problems'. Some of these challenges however are briefly summarised as below:

- Social work and social development: Social work education needs to reflect on the wider social and structural issues of poverty, inequality and the impact of conflict on forced migration and enable social work practitioners to develop knowledge and skills to work in global social work and social development settings responding to complex emergencies.
- Standards of social work education: While the regulatory frameworks that inform social work in much of the Western social work contexts is formal and attuned to local needs, a deeper understanding of global issues and challenges would enable students to gain a wider perspective. Similarly, there is an imperative on social work education and training in developing countries to regulate the profession with professional accreditation with a view to driving up standards.

- International social work as a core element of social work curriculum: While the concept of international social work has gained momentum in the recent past, particularly in some parts of the world, a commitment to incorporating international social work into the teaching curriculum would enable students to be better prepared for dealing with global challenges and cross-cultural issues in practice. Increasingly, there is a growing interest in international placements for social work students as part of degree programmes; a step in the right direction. The success of creating a workforce that is equipped to deal with the global challenges of 21st century depends on acquiring the skills and knowledge to respond to them effectively; the more international exchanges and work experience a practitioner has the better.
- Social work as a human rights discipline: Reviewing the various chapters incorporated in this book and evidence from elsewhere indicates that social work is a discipline that strives to deal with the local problems and challenges than a grand human rights endeavour (Stark, 2014). However, central to social work is a commitment to respond to poverty, inequality and to promote social justice; a commitment to empower marginalised individuals and communities. If this is the core identity of social work, then there is a need to understand social work as an important social justice effort and human rights as a core principle underlying social work education.
- Collective action and social movements: Social work in more formal settings such as in the West has become rather oblivious to the global challenges, such as climate change, disaster management, forced displacement or migration and so on. Collective action and social movements are pivotal to challenging institutions and multi-national corporations to understand the impact of these challenges on the global poor in such a way that action can be taken to address these issues.
- The Global Agenda: While the three international bodies representing social work and social welfare (viz, IFSW, IASSW & ICSW) reached a commitment to promoting the core themes identified in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, the success depends on the extent to which these aspirations are embedded in social work curriculum and practice—locally and globally.

Social work in much of the Western world has the benefit of formally recognised standards, regulatory powers and protected title; however the field of social work in developing countries and particularly in the least developed countries of the world is being diluted by other allied professions. Conversations with academics and practitioners in such contexts point to an emerging paradigm where new applied courses such as international development and development studies, human rights, law and community management programmes are edging social work practitioners on to the margins. The number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is on the rise, but they operate with shrinking funds and their survival is uncertain. This can be challenging not only for the people for whom social work exists to serve, but also for those who are qualifying as social workers with lesser job opportunities (Palattiyil and Sidhva, 2012). Interestingly, many of the International Development and comparable degrees offered in the West equip their students for work in NGOs in developing countries; while what these NGOs are engaged in doing is social work or more precisely international social work.

In conclusion, social work both locally and globally needs to embark on bold and innovative approaches, such as social development and community engagement, collective action and social movements, reflecting the conscientization approach of Paulo Freire (1972), with a commitment to revolutionary change (Kendall, 2000) to realise equality, human rights and social justice. While honouring the diversity of social work practice and the increasing role of allied professionals in NGOs, there is a clear need for reclaiming international social work with a view to realising the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. Does this mean a new consortium for international social work is called for or existing set-ups such as the Katherine A. Kendall Institute for International Social Work or the International Consortium for Social Development is equipped to provide the leadership and direction for international social work for global action.

The need of the hour is to have the courage, vision and fortitude to be open to local as well as global challenges to realise the transformative power of social work and to stand united to promote social justice, equality and human rights for all. For, when we stand united, we can challenge oppression, discrimination and inequality, as embodied in the following quote:

“I will never forget that the only reason that I’m standing here today is because somebody, somewhere stood up for me when it was risky. Stood up when it was hard. Stood up when it wasn’t popular. And because that somebody stood up, a few more stood up. And then a few thousand stood up. And then a few million stood up. And standing up, with courage and clear purpose, they somehow managed to change the world”.

—Barack Obama

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